Evangelion Time Loop: The First Crash

By: Leviticus Wilkes

When Gendo ended up in the Time Loops, Shinji was content to let Asuka and Kaoru abuse him. But when Gendo starts to show signs of breaking, Shinji decides to help him, by recalling the time he broke: The First Crash. Themes of suicide.

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Introduction

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Eva Loop: The First Crash

A/N: This is a story that uses the Innortal style time looping system. If you are not familiar with it, this may be a bit hard to understand. The short of it is this: Time is broken, and the populace of the multiverse is out for Gendo's blood. Thankfully, the bulk of this story doesn't touch on that too much, so Joe Schmoe should be able to read this.

Hopefully.

It was a regular loop for Gendo Ikari. The first thing he did was duck underneath a barrage of swords flung by Asuka, followed quickly by fleeing from Kaoru's expanding AT-field, and finally he managed to find where the doctors had stashed Rei and hide there. After that, he waited until either Shinji arrived and gave him the all-clear, or Asuka or Kaoru broke down the door and dragged him out to meet his fate.

It bore repeating: a regular loop.

As it turned out, Shinji did show up eventually. He even managed to keep a scowl off of his face as he escorted Gendo passed the murderous duo that had come to really, really despise him. Once he and Shinji were outside, beyond the boundaries of the NERV headquarters, Gendo gave his son a customary goodbye, and left for a favored bar.

As was normal, as was common now, Gendo Ikari spent the next few weeks drinking. Gendo had been a drinking man before Yui, and once she had managed to crack into his heart, he had managed to break the vice. Now, with an eternity without Yui and with a son that hated him, Gendo's life had devolved. His day to day activities consisted of a grand, endless bar crawl. In many ways, it was

Gendo's new way of life. After years of trial and error he had even gotten good at dodging Seele and NERV agents.

And so, Gendo drank, and drank, and drank. When he was done, he thanked the bartender, and left, and found another bar, where he drank again. Life, for Gendo Ikari, was at an all-time low.

It was a simple fact that, after many loops of contemplation, trying to be antagonistic, and getting the crap beaten out of him by Asuka and Kaoru, Gendo had simply given up. He had nothing left to live for. Outside his loop, he went through the motions, when he wasn't running from other loopers that hated him. Drinking was his only release.

Gendo's first and so far only suicide attempt, an overdose, had actually succeeded, since none of the present loopers had cared enough. Asuka and Kaoru had spent the loop sneering at him, Rei hadn't reacted at all, Shinji avoided him, and Penpen rolled his eyes and drank some beer. Gendo himself had decided not to commit suicide after that: death was pointless in the loops, and passing away in a haze wasn't quite enjoyable. The whole feeling had been...

Unsettling.

And so, Gendo drank, and lived in a haze of beer. Angels would attack Tokyo 3, the army would storm the city, great tentacle monsters would emerge from the sewers, and all Gendo did was drink. There really wasn't anything else he could do, anything that the loopers of NERV would let him do.

This was life for Gendo Ikari.

"Pathetic."

Gendo lifted his head from the long, mahogany bar that he had fallen asleep laying against. The lights were bright, but not too bright, the sounds loud but not too loud. He wasn't drunk enough, not yet.

"Hey baka, didn't you hear me? You're pathetic."

Gendo blinked hard and looked over his shoulder. A mash of bronze and blue was standing in the doorway. Gendo concentrated enough to flush the alcohol from his system and clear up his eyesight. Asuka Langley Soryu was glaring at him with a burning hatred and disdain that only she and Kaoru could fully bring to bear. "Hello Asuka."

Asuka marched over, her aura kicking up a storm, fury developing on her face. "Don't move freak. I want to enjoy this." Asuka grabbed Gendo by the back of his shirt and threw him across the empty room, watching him crash into a dozen tables with real schadenfreude. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy this... now hold still."

Gendo didn't bother to stop Asuka from grabbing him again and throwing him against the wall. Kicks, punches, all manner of bodily harm fell on Gendo. Throughout it all, the defunct director of NERV made no move to defend himself, even as Asuka's blows grew more wild and violent.

Finally, Asuka finished with a kick to the stomach. "Hn. Not a word out of you this time? Don't you know I like it when you're in pain? Pathetic and a coward." Asuka spat on Gendo and left him there, battered, broken and bruised. And then Gendo made a mistake.

Just as Asuka had grabbed the door knob on her way out, Gendo said something. "As if you're any better." Five words. Five solitary words. And Hell to pay.

Asuka froze. Seconds ticked by. Then the pilot of Unit Two began to shake, first subtly, and then violently. The door knob began to squeal as Asuka crushed it with her bare hand. Gendo got the faint impression that he had said something out of place. He managed to climb to his feet and walked into the center of the room. "Asuka..."

Asuka ripped the door off of its hinges, threw it at Gendo, and *roared* . " ***FUCK YOU!*** "

Gendo just manage to raise his arms to shield his face before the door slammed into him, throwing him across the room and into the racks of alcohol across the back of the bar.

Flickers of pain accompanied the removal of each shard of glass from Gendo's back. His mind freed from the cloud of alcohol that had suffused it earlier, Gendo felt each shard twitching in his back acutely. The only solace he found was that of knowing that Rei was doing her best to remove each shard, which is to say, perfectly.

Neither spoke of why Gendo had gone to Rei. They both knew that Rei didn't care for Gendo, didn't even consider him human, but for whatever reason, Rei still helped him, and did not hurt him. In Gendo's mind, it was almost as bad as Asuka and Kaoru's frequent assaults. At least they came back to Gendo: Rei didn't even give him that courtesy.

Speaking of Kaoru...

"Rei! Oh come on. I just gassed this chainsaw, and here you are playing operation on Gendo?" Kaoru strolled into the room without a care in the world, a large chainsaw slung over his shoulder. "Seriously girl, I just got this sweetheart."

Gendo twisted his neck as much as his spine would allow so as to get a better view of Kaoru Nagisa. In this loop, as Kaoru would often do, he had been assigned by Seele to monitor the pilots early, rather than engage himself as a pilot. Gendo assumed that Kaoru had done it simply to have an excuse to attack him regularly.

Rei, for her own measure of reaction, remained focused on Gendo's back, extracting the embedded glass, only breaking from the routine when Kaoru had gone "boring", and tried to rev up his chainsaw. Rei had snatched it out of his hands and dropped it into her subspace pocket.

Gendo closed his eyes and waited as Rei started picking the last of the glass from his back. He did open them back up when Kaoru prodded his forehead.

"You really pissed off Asuka, you know that Gen-Gen?" Kaoru's ever present smile turned a degree more ferocious and sadistic. "You should have seen what she did. Oh, and by the way, if you start hearing anything about the sudden destruction of Jupiter or stuff like that, don't worry, we have a couple spares that we can replace it with." Kaoru smiled sweetly at Gendo's sudden sweating. *'Damn, I love riling this guy up.'*

Rei finished removing the glass and swabbed Gendo's back with disinfectant. "I'm almost finished. Allow me one minute to complete this."

Kaoru winked at Gendo, pulling another chainsaw from his pocket and fingering the starter. "So Gendo, what exactly did you say to Asuka that got her so riled up? It obviously wasn't a dig at her mother. Couldn't have been a common insult. And you certainly didn't mention any of us, since she would have killed you then and there. So what did you say?"

Rei subtly cocked an ear at Gendo, and finished applying the disinfectant. Kaoru smirked and tapped the starter to the chainsaw a few times for affect. Gendo remained impassive, and once he determined that his words may, minutely, prolong his presence inside the loop, spoke. "She said I was pathetic for getting drunk and running away from the loop, and I asked if she was any different."

The silence that followed was palpable. The hair on the back of Gendo's neck rose as he realized what a dangerous thing he had just said. Rei and Kaoru, the two strongest angels in all of the loops, were silently staring at him. Suddenly, a tear rolled down Kaoru's face, followed by another. Kaoru stood and left the room.

Rei followed him, emotionless, still, almost automatic in actions. She didn't look at Gendo, didn't even react his calls. All she did was walk

to the door and open it. And then, ever so silently, she looked at Gendo with an absolutely dead gaze.

The door closed.

Gendo's apartment looked like it had been ransacked while he was gone. Pillows were tossed every which way, the table was on its side, obviously someone had tried to cook a meal and forgotten its existence, and for whatever reason, a dead camel was rotting on the rug. The last fact was a perfect example of insult to injury: Kaoru and Asuka had obviously reinterpreted Boromir's line about being unable to simply walk somewhere, and applied it to his apartment.

Gendo didn't care anyway. He was only there to collect a spare pair of glasses, since the supply in his still small subspace pocket had run out again. A quick rifling through a small wooden cupboard resulted in several pairs being collected, and once Gendo had removed the obviously and subtly booby-trapped ones, selected one with a mildly functioning nose piece and put it on.

Gendo jumped when he heard the knock at his front door. The noise was surprisingly alien to the ancient (or depending on your frame of reference, infantile) man, if only because he had been outside if his apartment for so long that he had lost his acclimation to it. Quickly adjusting his glasses and checking to see if he was presentable (he was wearing his usual NERV suit, albeit one that was quite torn due to Asuka's attack), Gendo righted himself and marched over to the front door, sliding it open efficiently.

Shinji, with Rei, Asuka, and Kaoru arrayed behind him, was standing at the door. "We need to talk." It wasn't a request; it was a command.

Gendo nodded and stepped aside. "Welcome to my apartment. Please ignore the mess, I've had something of a break in."

Asuka kicked the decaying camel on the floor. "Ugh. Kaoru, I told you this was a bad idea. We should have gone for the piles of

cannabis. That would have been funnier."

"Meh. I thought the smell would be funny," the perpetually unperturbed angelic boy admitted honestly. "And hey, we have Rei here. Rei, be a darling and give us some clean air, pretty please?"

Rei opened a window and used airbending to move the rot filled air out of the apartment. "Is this satisfactory?"

Asuka kicked the camel and sent it into her subspace pocket. "Show off. I could do the same with my fire bending."

"Knock it off, you three, we're here for a reason." Shinji waved his hand and used the force to set the whole of the room back into its original, undamaged form. "If everyone would sit down now, then we can begin."

Kaoru hopped onto the couch that Shinji had righted, laying lengthwise across the cushions. Shinji joined him a moment later, sitting normally. Rei perched herself on the arm rest next to Shinji, content to the small allotment of space. Asuka pulled a high backed chair out of her pocket and sat in that. "So what are we here for Baka-Shinji? A rousing discussion of revenge plans? Psychological torture? Fear induction? Oh, wait, I know: you want to brag about how many times you've slept with Ritsuko."

Shinji rolled his eyes. "Asuka, that's not it at all. We're here to speak with him."

It was starting to dawn on Gendo that something was terribly amiss. The fury from Asuka, Kaoru crying, Rei going completely emotionally dead... something seemed to be up.

At that moment, all four children in the room turned and looked at Gendo, all with varying degrees of loathing in their gazes. The father of the Fourth Looper held up his hands placatingly. "Look, you can do whatever you want to me, I don't care anymore. Can I please just go get a drink?"

A beer flew through the air and nearly struck Gendo in the head. The five traced it's trajectory to see, to their surprise, Penpen. "What? You four go out to interrogate Gendo and forget about me? I'm as much a looper as any of you."

Gendo blinked hard to make sure that Penpen was really there. "I will never get over that talking penguin."

"Feh. You'll love it when you meet Private," Asuka sneered.

Penpen sat down against the couch and looked Gendo straight in the eye. "So what did you do? Insinuate that you've done more girls then Shinji?"

"Actually, Gendo said that he didn't care about what happened to him in the loops," Shinji surmised. For a moment, an imperceptible look crossed his face. Had Gendo's social skills been better, he may have recognized it for what it was: anxiety.

Penpen slurped his beer. "Oh this is going to be good."

Shinji looked his father in the eye for the first time in years. Concern freely coalesced onto his face, if only in a small quantity. "Gendo... damn it," Shinji said quietly. Rallying again, Shinji tried a second time.

"Gendo, I know that things are bad. And that we haven't been helping you. But you need to understand that if you keep this up, if this disregard for your own life continues, you could develop Sakura Syndrome... or worse." Shinji's left hand clenched hard, before relaxing. To himself, Shinji noted the oddity of such a movement: it was the first time in millennia he had ever experienced that tic. "Gendo... after hearing what you said, we, the four of us, came to a consensus." Shinji pointed at himself and the other pilots.

"We think that it's time we tell you."

Gendo cocked an eyebrow, ever so slightly, just enough for it to go unnoticed. "Tell me what?"

Shinji inhaled deeply. Kaoru winced to himself, scared to confront that particular part of his past. Asuka huffed and looked away. Rei stilled and became more distant, if only for a moment. And then Shinji spoke.

"I think it's time we told you about the First Crash."

Imagine an endless hell. A life so fully devoid of purpose and meaning that it smothered you, crushed you, drove you nearly to madness. A world where time reset, where your actions meant nothing because they never lasted. A world where love was torture, soothing was pain, and life was living death. That was the life of Shinji Ikari, Rei Ayanami, Asuka Soryu, and Kaoru Nagisa. There was only a single point of solace, and it was too far away to bear.

The time loops were an impenetrable enigma, so thoroughly incomprehensible for the loopers of the Eva-verse, that back then before the first fused loops, it didn't even have a name. The loopers called them resets, or iterations, or going back, or, in a bout of rare luck, loops.

No one knew what they were. No one could explain them. The loops just... were. Sometimes Rei was there, sometimes Asuka, sometimes Kaoru, sometimes a combination of all three. Shinji was always there though: sometimes with his friends as company, sometimes alone. It was the loops that he was alone that he couldn't bear.

Shinji hadn't known what was happening in the beginning of it all. He was lost, dazed and confused. The first time he tried anything, to tell people what was happening, to change something, NERV had found him, and tortured him until they knew everything he had known. The second time, he was just killed, by pure accident. The third time didn't change anything.

Asuka had spent whole loops crying after she first came back, her walls down, her emotions free for the world to see. Rei had gone on a rampage, slaughtering everyone near her, only stopping when she had accidentally killed Shinji and restarted everything. Kaoru... Kaoru had stepped off of his little statue, the very same one that Shinji had first met him under, and greeted Shinji with a kiss and a question of how he had been.

The loops wore on, Shinji no longer alone, but despite everything, despite killing himself hundreds of times, despite allowing Instrumentality to play out, despite every atrocity and monstrous act he and his fellows committed...

Eternity rolled on.

And then one day, Kaoru read a few notes on the Evangelions, and Adam and Lilith. And suddenly, a new idea came to be.

If they could fuse their Eva's together, and channel the power that the strange creatures contained, than maybe, just maybe, they would be able to write themselves out of existence. They would almost certainly kill the whole of Earth along the way, but at the same time...

They just didn't care.

They made their pact. The next time all four came together, they would use the Eva's to destroy everything. Everything would end, and empty oblivion awaited the four pilots.

Not a single one had even been more scared, or more thrilled, than ever before. Their eternity in hell would soon be over. They just needed to be patient.

"I'm sure it's around here somewhere..."

'Take a left, down four doors, on the right, eight flights of stairs, behind blast doors, and then you're at the Eva cages.'

Misato couldn't hear Shinji's thoughts. "Alright, this way Shinji," she said, obliviously leading Shinji to the left, and getting them even more lost. "Uhhhhh..."

Shinji pointed at what looked like a wall panel. "Maybe we should head this way? It's a door."

Misato chuckled lightly. "Shinji, that's not a door. I'm a little lost but even I-"

The 'wall' slid open, revealing a rather annoyed bottle blonde. "Misato, what are you doing? You were supposed to be at the Eva Cages thirty minutes ago."

Misato winced. "Sorry Rits. Just got a little lost on the way."

Ritsuko Akagi frowned and stepped aside to admit her directionless friend and the pilot. "Make sure it doesn't happen again Misato." Ritsuko glanced at Shinji, recognition and annoyance, with just a touch of anger and pity, filling her face. "So I take it this is the third child?"

Shinji, in his own manner, winced. *'Yeah, just keep that ambiguity going. It's not like you want me to be able to do anything here, right?'*

"Yeah, this is him. Shinji Ikari, meet Ritsuko Akagi." Misato slapped Shinji on the back affectionately. "She's the brains behind this whole operation."

"Speaking of that," Shinji said, sticking to his memorized script, "what is this place? An entire Geofront, and I don't even know what I'm doing here." Shinji, as one could infer, had become very good at lying.

The elevator had reached the Eva cages by the time Ritsuko answered. "This facility was established in 2004, in preparation for the events you have seen transpire outside of our borders. This entire facility, along with the organization that controls it-"

Shinji tuned out Ritsuko's lecture, nodding and going "hmm" and "yes" at the appropriate times. The good doctor's motorboat carried the three of them swift and truly to the Eva cages, and once docked there, Shinji disembarked and walked inside, waiting for the technicians to throw the lights dramatically.

And what a dramatic light throwing it wasn't. The lights came on, Shinji found him face to face with Unit 1 slash Yui Ikari, and Ritsuko stated as grandly as her poor oration skills could allow: "Artificial human, Evangelion."

Shinji was not impressed, but faked interest impeccably. "So this, all of this, is part of my father's work?"

"Correct." Shinji didn't need to look up: he knew it was his father. "Shinji, listen very carefully. You must ride in the Evangelion."

Shinji internally rolled his eyes and didn't look at his father. "But... I can't."

"You must, my son."

The argument continued like that for several minutes, Shinji operating on automatic. Finally, in an attempt to guilt trip his son, Gendo called out Rei. Doctors rolled the wounded young woman out to the cage, where Gendo very pointedly stated that, if Shinji couldn't pilot, then Rei would. It was then that a sudden tremor struck the Geofront, and the building shook.

Shinji acted on reflex, seizing Rei and cradling her, twisting to shield her from the falling debris. It was honestly pointless: Rei had long since mastered her AT-field to the point that she could and in this

case did use it to shield them. Shinji recognized the implicit sign of Rei's presence, and gently returned her to her gurney. "Rei..."

Rei's lone visible eye winked at Shinji, a minute gesture that meant the world to her fellow pilot. Infinitely more at ease, Shinji turned to his father. "Alright..." Shinji caught himself just before he said something that sounded too confident. "I'll... I'll do it. I'll pilot."

The battle with Sachiel went simply. Shinji engaged the angel with carefully measured prowess, fighting with just enough ferocity to fake Unit One's berserker mode, but with enough control to kill the angel before its core went critical. The angel slain, Shinji allowed his exhaustion to overtake him (piloting in this manner always tired him out), and passed out inside his plug.

The next morning, Shinji watched as Misato argued with Ritsuko on the phone over whether or not he was going to stay with Misato. Shinji knew that Misato was going to win, and didn't try to prevent it. Misato's apartment was one of the few in the entire city that always lacked surveillance, even when she had all four pilots living there. Misato put the phone back and gestured for Shinji to follow her, having, once again, won the argument to host him at her home. As Shinji followed her though, the phone that she had spoken with went off again. With lightning reflexes, Shinji answered the carefully timed phone call. "Hello?"

"...Shinji?"

"...Asuka."

"Rei?"

"Yeah. Kaoru?"

"Yeah..."

Shinji hung up the phone, swallowing hard and fighting tears. *'We're all here... will this be the last time we're together?'*

Shinji followed his guardian, turmoil roiling beneath his impassive face.

"Rei!? Rei, are you alright?"

Rei Ayanami opened her eyes to the blur that was her world, her gaze alighting upon the darkened figure above her. It dawned upon Rei that she was sitting inside her entry plug, just seconds after it had been forcibly removed from her unit. Ikari had come to save her. Rallying her faculties, Rei tried to think clearly. "Pilot... Shinji..?"

The blur sighed aloud, moving to give the impression of shaking its head. " *Dummkopf... Mein Vater wäre nicht glücklich , das zu hören sein.* (Silly... my father would have been angry if he heard that.)"

Rei smiled as Shinji's face fully formed in the darkness, her vision returning to normal. "The commander would have merely assumed my diligent application of my faculties to the task of learning your identity. I would merely have been reprimanded for wasting my time." Rei reached to take Shinji's outstretched arm, gripping up his forearm and pulling herself up out of the entry plug.

Shinji smiled, but it came apart as he and Rei stepped off from the waylaid entry plug. "Rei, why did you do that? You almost got killed *again* . Ramiel was *this* close to putting us both down, and you go ahead and let it try and fry Unit Zero."

Rei frowned and looked away from Shinji at his heartrending tone: not accusing, but concerned. "My goal was merely an illogical nostalgic repeat of the original events Shinji. Nothing more, but a danger to both of ourselves. I will-"

Shinji cupped Rei face. "Rei... stop. You can just say 'for old time's sake'. It's not your fault if you're nostalgic." A smile tickled the sides

of Shinji's lips. "Besides: when else am I going to have a chance to be a badass?"

Rei held up a finger, and then immediately thought better of making a deduction pertaining to when Shinji could next live out a power fantasy. Disregarding the issue, Rei strode down from the spot where Shinji had dropped her entry plug and went down to the beach of the Ashi Lake that Mt Futago had been perched by. Shinji followed, awkwardly slipping as the smooth soles of his plug suit struggled to find purchase on the sandy beach.

As the next half-hour passed, Rei and Shinji sat at the water's edge, listening to the gentle lap of the waves against the sand, the beautiful child of a drop of water meeting a reservoir and an ocean wave scraping against a long beach. Both had rolled their plug suits down to their waists to let their skin air out from the LCL baths, the cool night air a boon to the two children who had never seen even a flake of snow. Eventually, the sounds of nature managed to rise above the loud pings of settling metal that Unit's One and Zero emitted, with the noise of frogs and crickets and yes, even cicadas, returning to the lakeside world that Rei and Shinji found themselves under. Neither of them noticed though. Their eyes fell solely upon the stars.

Millions of distant twinkles of light. In countless arrangements and in thousands of colors, the stars shone on the impossibly dark country of Japan, all of its light stolen by the operation against the fifth angel. Underneath the impossibly dark skies, humanity received a reminder of how small they were, compared to the infinite vastness of the cosmos. It was almost enough to justify the goals of Seele: to create a god, and create meaning in a vast, meaningless universe. The height of absurdity.

On the lakeshore though, the universe of Rei Ayanami and Shinji Ikari extended to a few, solitary feelings. Of shoulder upon shoulder, arm upon arm, hand in hand. Shinji, his head tucked neatly against Rei's shoulder and into the crook of her neck. Rei, with her blue hair mingling with Shinji's black hair, her hand squeezing his, and

thoughts rolling within her head. Finally, within the hurricane that was her mind, a thought emerged and demanded address. "Pilot... Shinji?"

"Hmm?"

"Will this really be our last iteration?"

"...yeah. This is the last time we'll be here. The last time we'll kill the fifth. The last time-"

"We'll see the stars?"

"Yeah." Shinji looked up, staring at the vastness of space, fully appreciating the beauty of the sky.

And then tears began to gather on his face, and on Rei's, as they saw the same stars again, and realized, even with all of eternity before them, that they had memorized even that. Fighting back sobs, Rei turned to Shinji. "Do you... do you think that there will be stars where we're going?"

Shinji rubbed the tears from his eyes. "I don't... I don't think so. No?"

Rei grabbed Shinji and pulled him close. "Shinji, will you be there."

"I will."

The pacific fleet rolled with the waves as it trudged towards the shores of Japan. Its precious cargo: the body and soul of Adam, and the Evangelion designated Unit Two. Of course, only two occupants of the inbound helicopter knew this. After all, Kaoru typically used the transport of Unit Two as an excuse to tag along with Asuka on her way to Japan, especially if Asuka was aware of the time travel. It meant, as always, a beautiful reunion between the four pilots, and gave Kaoru the opportunity to watch Asuka go to town on Gaghiel.

As the helicopter that bore Misato, Shinji and Rei touched down on the aircraft carrier "Over The Rainbow" (formerly known as the "Enterprise CVN-65"), a familiar figure could be seen striding towards them. "Well well, Misato Katsuragi? Been a while hasn't it?"

Misato nearly jumped out of her skin. "Ka-Kaji? What are you doing here?"

Ryoji Kaji smiled at his old flame, a bit of his old swagger and charm leaking out of his disposition. "Oh, I'm floating around, here and there. What's NERV like, anything interesting happening?"

Shinji and Rei tuned out the typical banter of Misato and Kaji, both more or less able to react on instinct to their antics. Instead they took to looking for their fellow pilots. Asuka and Kaoru were usually on the deck by now, watching the waves roll by.

Lo and behold, the duo had gathered themselves on the aft deck, gazing out over the foamy water leaving the propellers. Shinji and Rei shared a quick, cheeky glance and tiptoed up behind them. Now if they were lucky...

Kaoru turned around and planted a quick kiss on Rei. "Afternoon, beautiful. How was the flight?"

Rei frowned ever so slightly in annoyance, her and Shinji's prank ruined, before speaking in her common manner. "Pi..." Everyone winced at Rei's difficulties with non-formal address. The bluenette was externally unfazed, and continued anyway. "Kaoru, if you continue to enact such public displays of affection, than it is more than likely that you will garner the attention of NERV's Sector 2, and Commander Ikari. In that situation, they will review your actions, and if they are deemed suspicious, or indicative of some form of prior rapport, they will act and interrupt our plans for this iteration." Rei pursed her lips as she finished. "These are facts that you are well aware of, I now believe, and you have simply allowed my digression for the sake of politeness."

Kaoru, Asuka and Shinji all nodded. The redhead even smirked a little. "Hn. Millions of years old and still speaking like a dictionary. You'll never change, eh wondergirl?" Asuka reached over and ribbed Rei.

Rei looked Asuka straight in the eye. "I find my current disposition to be satisfactory on all levels." A cheeky look overtook Rei. "That you have retained your bitchy personality despite all these iterations of turmoil and trauma is less than satisfactory."

Asuka frowned and tugged Rei's cheek in revenge. "Nah, you're just too uptight. You need to loosen up a little. Right boys?" Asuka cast her gaze at Shinji and Kaoru, who were staring dumbly at the girls. Kaoru turned to Shinji with an absolutely serious look on his face.

"You know Shinji, we really should have gone completely gay iterations ago. Would have saved us the trouble of keeping these two off each other's throats."

Shinji nodded, totally serious as well. "Absolutely. Much less work too when we're not playing peacekeepers."

Asuka grabbed Shinji and Kaoru by the ears. "Oh, so now we're the trouble?" Letting them go, Asuka dusted off her hands. "Come on Rei, let's get to Unit two. We can probably get away with some fun before Gaghiel shows up."

"Naturally," Rei agreed, even as Shinji and Kaoru grabbed their waists and began apologizing profusely. Rei shook Shinji off. "Well, I guess we're off now. Better enjoy becoming one before Gaghiel shows up."

A moment passed as the three pilots stared at Rei, before all four broke out into laughs. Asuka pulled both Shinji and Rei into a hug. "Gott en himmel, I missed you guys."

Kaoru got in on the group hug. "And what about me, ehhhohhh crap!" Kaoru jumped away from the group hug, leading to the three

to break up, as try noticed Misato and Kaji staring at them from a few feet away.

For a moment, no one spoke. Misato reached up, locked her mouth, and threw away the key. Kaji winked at them and made shushing motions with his finger. The pilots awkwardly thanked them, and watched them leave for the bridge.

Kaoru turned to Shinji, his good mood ruined by the intrusion, worry and more than a touch of fear coloring his face. "So... We're all here. Is this it?"

Shinji, silently nodded. "Yeah. It is."

Rei reached over and gently entwined her fingers with Kaoru. The scion of Adam smiled sadly. Shinji nodded to himself, his own mood dour. There really wasn't a way to be positive about it: they were planning to attempt suicide! How could you be positive?

"Come on guys... don't be so glum."

You could change your name to Asuka Langley Soryu, of course.

Asuka plowed on. "We're almost in the clear. We'll be free soon, able to finally rest.* I know that we'll never be able to get back to where we've been, but look at what we've done." Asuka started making hand gestures, diverting the attentions of her fellow pilots to her. "We've been to every country on the planet, learned to speak every language ever. Tasted food from a thousand cultures, seen every square mile of this planet, heard music to rapture the ears for ages, felt every feeling across the spectrum. Hell, we've already died countless times for each other. Do you really think I would have agreed to this if I had regrets?" A smile broke out across Asuka's face. "Tell me, is there even a single thing you would have done that you haven't already?"

The three gloomy, ancient children stared at Asuka. And then slowly, smiles found their way back onto their faces. Shinji ribbed Kaoru. "I

told you she was worth it."

"Yeah yeah."

At that moment, the warming buzzers began to sound. Asuka snapped her fingers. "That's our cue. You better head back to the bridge; I'll take care of Gaghiel."

Kaoru and Rei stepped past Asuka, but Shinji grabbed her hand. Asuka looked at the sudden joining, and then at Shinji. The young boy smiled at her, almost unsure. "Asuka... can I come? For old times' sake?"

Asuka frowned, but smiled anyway. "Well, at least I won't need to recalibrate for you thinking in Japanese."

Shinji chuckled. "Just try not to think like that yourself sweetheart."

"Sweetheart! Why I never..."

The pair went below deck, racing to catch their speedboat to Unit Two.

As was customary to the Evangelion pilots, Misato Katsuragi's residence was quickly partitioned as the official home for where they came to rest. Misato was more than pleased to play host to the four of them, but because she had caught them bonding upon the flight deck of the Over The Rainbow, all four were now victim to her selective teasing and innuendo. That said, Misato also didn't seriously imply that any of them were in any sort of relationship beyond friendly camaraderie, which suited them fine. As such, Misato wasn't obliged to mind them twenty four hours a day, and so when her work became too much and NERV was devoid of anything they were needed for, the pilots ended up with the apartment to themselves and Penpen.

Thus, the four put their isolation to good use, quickly falling into old rhythms and patterns established centuries, even millennia beforehand. For the particular night the Children found themselves in, just a few days before the discovery of the seventh angel Sandalphon, this meant one thing. Movie night.

Asuka skipped out to grab a movie, Shinji and Kaoru made the popcorn, and Rei configured an old movie projector that she had gotten from Kensuke. By the twilight of the day, the four had their beers and popcorn and movie all together and had settled down to watch: Asuka on the couch, Rei laying across the couch with her head nestled in Asuka's lap, Shinji and Kaoru both on the floor, leaning against the couch. Comfortable, within easy reach of the popcorn, and ready to watch the movie for the umpteenth time, Rei hit play.

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."

Star Wars played out like the magnificent opera with was, the company of pilots giving their own running commentary. The story would never change, with Obi Wan always facing off against Vader, Han always shooting first, with Leia always being awesome, etc. At the same time though, the movie was just that good. It may have been the same, but it was worth it.

Shinji swallowed a handful of popcorn, coming out to say, "You know, why couldn't we have been Luke and Han and Leia. It would have been so much more bearable. And entire galaxy to explore, no Eva's, just the four of us. It would have been awesome to have the Force."

Asuka looked at Shinji. "Well, unless you haven't noticed, there's four of us, and three of them. Who'd replace who?"

Shinji scratched at his chin. "Hmm... I guess I would take Luke since he's the main characters, Rei would be Leia because she's biologically my sister, Asuka could take Han... and Kaoru would replace Chewy, because he's taller than all of us."

That got few chuckles from the pilots. Kaoru flicked Shinji's shoulder playfully. "Actually, I think I'm a better fit for Luke. Me and Rei are the only people with supernatural powers on the whole planet after all."

Shinji cocked an eyebrow. "Oh really? And then who would I replace? I'm not a good for Chewbacca, and there isn't anyone else I could be, so who-"

"C-3PO," the three other pilots chimed to Shinji's chagrin. The younger Ikari winced and conceded the point, turning his attention back to the movie. On screen, Darth Vader was choking a counselor with the Force. Shinji pointed at the helmeted man. "You know who he'd be replaced by. My dad. That way I'd have Carte Blanche to kick his ass."

"Get in line, Shinji," Asuka said. "You and about three billion others." A thoughtful look overtook Asuka. "However... maybe Kaji would go well as Obi Wan. The father figure replacement, tragically cut down by the real, abusive father. In fact, you and Luke do share the 'raised by aunt and uncle' status as well. Maybe Luke is* a good fit for you."

Kaoru nodded sagely. "You can't go wrong with that logic. Oh, if only we really did live in Star Wars. Maybe Luke would enjoy being an Evangelion pilot. Hell, maybe Leia would. Who knows?" Kaoru grabbed a handful of popcorn and stuffed it in his mouth. "Who knows?"

Rei held up a finger into the air. "Shush. There is a movie playing that emotionally fulfills me. Be silent."

The four watched the movie without comment from then on.

Asuka had planted herself outside of Misato's residence, her laptop on, well, her lap, her fingers dancing across the keys like leaves across a still lake. The cicadas chirped and warbled above her in the endless summer sun, the sky its usual crystalline blue. All she

needed was some chai tea, and it would have been a slice of paradise.

Rei had been planning on going outside for a few hours when she had noticed Asuka sitting outside in her computer, and seized upon the chance presented. As such, Rei had quickly brewed some tea and was now making her way to Asuka, two cups of chai in her hands. Asuka grabbed the proffered cup and drank a little. "Yum. Thank you."

"There is no need to mention it," Rei said in an inflectionless manner.

Asuka reached up with the hand not holding her tea and poked Rei as she sat down next to her. "Which is why I do. Because I like being pointless."

"I believe our mutual politeness was the point of my statements."

"Mutual smutual. You just love hearing yourself talk like that."

"I do. Don't you?"

Asuka held up her un-chai'd hand and wiggled it flatly. "Eh. I'm on the fence for it." Asuka set her tea aside and typed out another line of text in her computer.

Rei leaned over and glanced at the document that had been opened for Asuka to work on. A quick examination revealed its identity. "You're rewriting your thesis on the sinusoidal structures of Absolute Territory fields?"

"Yup. When I'm finished with this it'll be the most complete dissertation on AT fields in the entire universe." Asuka pointed from the computer to her head, an embarrassed bead of sweat trickling down it. "And then I'll need to commit it and the edits to memory."

Rei pursed her lips and nodded, sipping her green tea thoughtfully. "It must be a struggle, trying to recall so much information."

Asuka chuckled. "Oh, you just need to know how it all fits together to understand it. Besides, I only have three hundred theses in my head: I don't need to worry about forgetting anything."

Rei glanced at the page, easily and suddenly gaining a whole new level of understanding for how her AT field worked. "Your doctorates degrees are well earned Asuka."

Asuka, otherwise known as the unofficial owner of every doctorates, bachelors, and associate's degree known to man, laughed in gratitude. "Trust me wondergirl, I wouldn't have made it far without Shinji or Kaoru." Asuka sipped her tea, grinning cheekily. "Though I could have gone a few times without the distractions of such a sexy young girl like yourself."

Rei subtly raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? Then am I distracting you now?"

Asuka walked two fingers up Rei's arm. "Maybe..."

"Then I shall be going now," Rei said, standing up quickly. Asuka gasped and grabbed Rei by the arm, dragging the giggling bluenette back down. "I'm merely joking Asuka."

"Yeah yeah yeah," Asuka playfully hit Rei in the shoulder. "Stuck around wondergirl, maybe you'll learn something."

The two girls spent the entire day outside, drinking tea and discussing AT fields.

NERV had controlled Kaoru for so long that, when he finally started exercising free will within the many temporal repeats that were occurring, he'd been secretly terrified. Kaoru Nagisa, otherwise known as Tabris the Seventeenth angel, had been the Angel of Free Will, and found himself, ironically, trapped between a rock and a hard place. To kill humanity, or die by it. In his first life, he had chosen not to be killed, but to give his life to the one person he had ever loved:

Shinji. The first time he had returned, he had simply thought he was trapped by his fate. For a time though, as he learned, he had come to feel that he now did have true free will.

Now he knew better, and had chosen to die on his own terms again.

Up in the Pribnow box, Ritsuko Akagi politely told Kaoru to relax, exactly as Kaoru and Shinji expected she would. Kaoru allowed his sync ratio to climb another notch after a moment, and, as predicted, Ritsuko told him he was doing a good job. It was the same game all over again: keeping their sync ratios down in a believable range while looking like they were trying to push them as high as possible. This wasn't merely standard stuff, inside of sync tests it had become second nature.

The days were starting to drag again, for all four of the pilots. Kaoru had expected as much. If only because nowadays he expected everything. The euphoria of knowing that it would all end soon was fading, alternatively replaced by raw fear, and the frustration of waiting. It irked Kaoru.

Ritsuko soon called an end to the test, dismissing the boys and calling in the girls for their testing. Kaoru heaved himself out of the entry plug, his LCL soaked feet squelching against the metal deck. Shinji hopped out of his and waved Kaoru over. "Good job at the tests," Shinji said, sticking to a memorized script.

Kaoru nodded and smiled taking up his end of the script. "You did very well yourself Shinji. Soon you'll be passing Asuka's score."

Shinji started off for the changing room. "I don't think I should... Asuka doesn't like it as it is."

"Oh, she's just like that," Kaoru falsely comforted resting a hand on Shinji's shoulder.

Shinji glanced at the hand, and then very gently removed it, holding it in his own. Kaoru raised his eyebrows at Shinji sudden deviation

from the script, but Shinji's honest smile put his mind at rest. "You know Shinji, if they catch us doing this, there will be questions."

Shinji lightly squeezed Kaoru's hand, the euphoria of self-assurance, knowing that they would soon be free, and true love managing to break his stifled gloomy mood. "They could. But I don't care."

Kaoru smiled and walked down the halls again, his hand entwined with Shinji's. He kept his mind from recalling that this wasn't the first time he had felt Shinji's hand, not the first time they had walked around NERV base holding hands, not the first time for anything. He just tried to focus on how good it felt.

The good feeling could only last so long though, and it ran out by the time Shinji and Kaoru had reached the changing rooms. Kaoru instead focused on something else. "Shinji, will this be our last time... going through this world?"

Shinji didn't meet Kaoru's eyes, his own doubts all too clear on his face. "I... don't know."

Kaoru turned to face Shinji fully. "Are you afraid?"

Shinji's lips twitched. 'Afraid, sad, angry... hopeful.' Shinji knew, in his gut, that if this didn't work, they would all go insane. He'd spent year wondering if he had gone mad, fears that had only abated when Asuka had shown up amongst the repeats. But now that the end of their time was so close...

He didn't know.

Shinji traced across Kaoru's hand, following the lines of his palm through his hand. "I know this hand..." His feeling fingers travelled up. "This arm..." And across to just above Kaoru's heart. "Every inch of this body... there's nothing new here. Nothing to pursue. Nothing to accomplish. There is no meaning of life for us, because we can never stop. To live..."

"...Is to die," Kaoru finished.

Shinji's hand was joined by the other. Both slipped around Kaoru's chest and onto the small of his back. "Yeah..."

Kaoru held Shinji, tears mingling with LCL. "A meaningful life... must have a death."

"Do you think they would have been proud?"

"Come again?"

Kaoru and Rei had, for the night, agreed to leave their home and eat out. In this case, that meant fancy clothes and a lavish dinner at one of Tokyo 3's most premier restaurants, The Inversion. It was a largish establishment located on the bottom floor of one of the skyscrapers, giving it a perfect view of the Geofront deep below the city. Its location also made it the most expensive restaurant in the entire city, but the paycheck for saving the world, coupled with a quick flash of the NERV id badge, was literally all the two teens needed to get in.

The dinner, while exquisite and truly worth the price of admission, was really only part of the attraction. Most came for the prestige of actually being able to enter, and the simply wonderful view. Rei used to visit sparingly, to preserve that majesty.

Now it was just a place to eat.

"I asked you, Kaoru, if the First Ancestral Race would have been proud of what we've accomplished?"

Kaoru sipped his goblet of wine (vintage, from the stores of Napoleon Bonaparte, and worth more than most men made in a century), thoughtfully. "You know Rei... I'm not quite sure what you mean by that."

Rei shrugged. "They created Lilith and Adam and the other five Progenitors. They created the Lances, the Moons, everything, to spread life to the cosmos. And yet... they also tried to keep the black and white moons from meeting, to keep those bearing the fruit of knowledge, those like humanity, from meeting those who bore the fruit of life, like the angels." Rei swirled her wine around in its goblet. "And when it failed and they met, when we met, we recreated... recreate, their progeny."

"So I'm asking if you think they would be proud of that."

Kaoru didn't answer Rei for a long while. Finally, he managed to articulate his response. "I don't know. Do you think they would be proud?"

Rei looked Kaoru straight in the eye. "I know that they wouldn't be proud of what we're doing."

Kaoru leaned back, a frown gracing his features. "And finally, the truth comes out."

"Kaoru, if we do kill ourselves-"

"Rei, stop." Kaoru held up an open palm. "I know what you're going to say. If we do this, we're throwing away our ability to choose, to learn and grow and become better, stronger people. That we'd make the ultimate choice; not to choose." An exhausted look overtook Kaoru, one cultivated by literal millennia of pain and frustration. "That's it, isn't it?"

Rei sighed and sagged into her chair. "We have free will: we're people. Not human, but we are people. I... I don't know if what we're doing... if it's right."

Kaoru and Rei sat there, silent, and waiting. Finally, Rei spoke again. "I'm scared."

"I know. I am too."

The dojo was empty. That was the first thing that Asuka expected, and it was the first thing she saw. Asuka had memorized the patterns of occupancy long ago, and knew exactly when she could visit to have time alone. It never changed.

Asuka adjusted her gee, flipping the shinai (a practice sword) in her hands over a few times to get its balance. Finding just where it could be held for maximum effect, Asuka entered into a wide footed stance. It was a stance that she knew by heart. It would never change.

Asuka made a few steps forward, feeling the rubber floor cover flex underneath her bare feet. Her opponent was a rolled tatami mat, mounted on a spool. Asuka knew the tatami mat like the back of her hand. She knew all of them intimately. They never changed.

Asuka moved through a quick kata. Three blows fell on the mat, the mat and shinai flexing in the same manner they always did. Asuka growled and blitzed the mat again with a sudden and brutal series of slashes. The mat yielded in the exact. Same. Way.

Asuka screamed and swung so hard that her shinai broke against the mat. Asuka stabbed the mat with the splintered end and then began pounding it with her fists, screaming incoherently, screaming about how everything never changed.

"Don't fight angry. You'll lose regardless."

Asuka's punches lost their strength, the blows falling slower, and then stopping. Exhausted, the redhead sagged against the mat, her legs weak beneath her. "Baka... You know you shouldn't be here."

"And where would I be, school?" Shinji quipped. "You know they can't teach me anything. Besides, you're more fun. And you're bleeding."

Shinji crossed the mat and pulled Asuka's hand from her side, showing the fiery redhead the cuts her knuckles had developed. "You really shouldn't be punching a mat with splinters in it."

"They'll heal. And besides..." Asuka glanced at her bloodied fists. "This isn't the first time I've done this."

Shinji shrugged, pulling two shinai out from behind his back. "Well, since you're so focused on sword fighting, best two out of three?"

Asuka sighed, but clicked her lips after a seconds and stood a little taller. "You think you can beat me? I've practically written the book on swordplay."

"Well I've got experience," Shinji retorted. Tossing Asuka one of the shinai, Shinji stepped back a few paces and held the sword at his side. "When you're ready."

Asuka bowed, as far into the pleasantries that she ever dove, and turned the sword towards Shinji. "Prepared to lose?"

"Are you?"

Asuka charged, spotting Shinji's tell, a slight twitch of the left leg, and countered his preemptive strike with one of her own. But Shinji had already see her goal and adjusted. Asuka replied with a swift blow that Shinji reversed, which she reversed.

After centuries of sword fighting, and millennia together, Shinji and Asuka knew each other inside out. It wasn't different. It wasn't new.

It was the same damn thing, just with different players, all over again.

Everything had gone according to plan. A missed deadline here, a bit of critical intelligence gone from there, and a delay to allow the Thirteenth to nearly reach Tokyo 3 and kill Toji, all of it culminated in

Seele sending the JSSDF to destroy NERV several days in advance. The Mass Produced Evangelion series were already being flown in. Within the hour, Third Impact would initiate, and humanity would find itself doomed, either by eleven old men who wanted to create a god, or by four ancient teens, who wanted to die.

In Shinji's mind, that was the clincher. Humanity was doomed. And once again, he was the one who was sending them straight to hell.

Good intentions, eh?

In the Eva cages, the unaware Anchor of Yggdrasil's Evangelion branch, the unknown fourth looper to exist in the multiverse, Shinji Ikari, sighed. His company, Rei, Asuka and Kaoru, nodded silently, counting down the minutes. The four of them had elected to forgo plug suits, instead choosing to wear their school clothes. There hadn't been a specific plan to do so; Shinji merely imagined that it was automatic. He glanced at his watch, already knowing thanks to the noise what time it was. "The MP Eva's should be entering their holding formation now."

The three others nodded, their own foreknowledge confirmed. The moment passed, and then Kaoru spoke. "Well... everyone. Shall we?"

The four exchanged quiet good lucks and silent embraces, and boarded the Eva's. Asuka activated her Eva first, ready to break free from the locks. "Shinji, Rei, don't let Kaoru get caught, alright."

A comm channel opened, showing Shinji and Rei in Unit One's entry plug. "Right. Try not to have too much fun Asuka," Shinji replied.

Asuka broke the locks, and moved for the surface, tearing through the many levels of NERV headquarters, before erupting onto the surface. Instantly, helicopters and tanks began to fire on Asuka, missiles and cannons roaring at her. The German roared right back. "COME GET SOME!"

Back inside the Eva cages, Shinji and Rei watched with consternation as Kaoru stifled screams of red hot agony, clutching at his side as it dissolved slowly into LCL. "Come on Naoko... Nothing ventured... Nothing gained."

Asuka twisted, dodging a gigantic missile, responding with a high kick that crushed one of the helicopters. "Come on Mama! Let's kick their asses!" Asuka waded into the lake, seized the battleship that had been anchored there, and with an ungodly heave threw it at the Tank battalion. "HRRAAAA!"

"THERE IT IS!" Kaoru shouted as his S2 Organ was tapped by Unit Zero. With his power now slave to the Evangelion, Kaoru disengaged the umbilical cord and watched in satisfaction as the timer didn't move an inch. "Let's roll!" he shouted, leading Unit One out into the Geofront.

As the two Eva's with unlimited power approached Unit Two, nine shadows swept over the Geofront. Asuka gulped at the sight, involuntarily taking a step back into the deeper waters of the lake. Units One and Zero stepped into her flanks, crossing their arms protectively over the red Eva. "Alright Asuka," Shinji said through a comm channel. "We're guard you; just get that S2 Engine. Leave everything else to us."

Asuka rolled her eyes, suitably annoyed by both the fact that they thought she still needed protecting from the MP Eva's, and the fact that Shinji was repeating himself. "Oh blah blah blah. I know the plan." The MP Eva's landed. "That's why we won't lose." Asuka broke from formation, charging one of the MP Eva's and running it down before it could react, tearing away at the armor plates and exposing the red S2 engine. "Because I'm the best. Bon-appetite."

Shinji, Rei and Kaoru rushed to protect Asuka as Unit Two consumed the white Eva's S2 engine. The other Mass Produced Eva's charged at them, great-swords flashing in the light. The MP Eva's were monstrosities of strength, weapons that had no limit, no

control and no leash. To anyone else, they were walking disasters, the equivalent of stars turning against man.

To the time travelers, they were a walk in the park. Shinji had long since memorized their moves, rolling between each and every blow like a leaf on the wind. The Eva's though powerful creations of man, were still controlled by simple computers, and computers where predictable.

Synchronized with Unit One and Shinji, Rei could feel Shinji's intentions, his movements, and mirrored them with her own commands. Each move she made was calculated, perfect, and organized, completely in time with Shinji's own moves. Such was the nature of their relationship: ancient beings that had known each other for millennia.

Kaoru twisted amongst the Eva's his own predictions of their movements derived from a different source. Kaoru knew that the dummy plugs inside the Eva's were controlled by clones of himself, and as such was able to dodge every blow. He knew himself inside and out; it was Shinji, Asuka, and Rei who had taught him to look inward. They were the ones he had to thank for this battle.

Asuka straightened Unit Two, an evil smirk on her face as she saw her comrades and closest friends do battle against the Eva's, exhilaration seizing her as she realized that she was missing out on her last fight with her oldest companions. Seeing her friends battling, risking their lives to end them, was almost painful. "Now you didn't forget about me, did you?" The Eva, newly endowed with an S2 engine, ejected its power umbilical and joined the fray, ripping the white Eva's to shreds.

When the smoke settled, three Eva's stood tall. Not a single bullet, missile, or cannon round fell on their body. And now, the Eva's all had S2 engines.

Linking their arms, Kaoru began the fusion. "Initiate core exposure. Let's get this right the first time."

"Right," was the collective answer.

Before the eyes of their few onlookers, the three Eva's began to sink together, their armor falling off and exposing the skin of the monsters underneath. Inside the Eva's the four ancient children synchronized their AT-fields, ramping up their sync ratios passed one hundred, and then two hundred, and then three hundred.

The fused Eva's reached four hundred percent synchronization, and called down the true Lance of Longinus.

Inside the fused, godly being, Shinji could feel his companions, together, melded, within him and without.

" *To not know where you end and another begins* ," Rei said.

"It's truly something miraculous," Kaoru admitted.

"It's actually a little trippy," Asuka thought.

Shinji ground his allegorical teeth and summoned his will back to himself, reestablishing his AT-field for a brief moment. "It's almost here. I can feel it. In a moment, we'll be gone."

The feeling of connectivity wavered and broke. Asuka winked at Shinji within the white space. "I would never have imagined being here without you guys."

The Lance pierced the fused cores.

"Goodbwuve2 :) -;))))))

Shinji jolted awake.

He was sitting in a train car, moving on. Kaoru and Rei were sitting across from him, stunned. Asuka was next to him, shaking. Shinji looked at them. "What... what..."

Suddenly, Kaoru stood up, and strode out of the compartment. Shinji and Asuka shared a single glance and followed him, Rei following them. The foursome walked down the hallway and stopped at the last compartment. Kaoru grabbed the door and opened it, and all four stared in.

Ranma Saotome, Harry Potter, and Naruto Uzumaki stared back. Ranma groaned. "God... of all the worlds to loop next, yours just had to be it.

Gendo felt himself be pulled back hard by the scruff of his neck, emerging from the pensive with a pop of the ears. For a moment, he stared at Shinji, at Rei, Kaoru and Asuka. Finally, he found his voice. "That didn't need to be so long."

The silence that followed the declaration was palpable. After a second, Asuka chimed in. "That's what I said. That could have been a ten minute, fifteen minute memory at most. Why was it so long exactly?"

Shinji blinked in surprise. "Well-"

Rei held up a finger. "The current time is thirty minutes after we began viewing your recollection Shinji. It contained significant restatement of what was previously established, and has had little bearing in our decisions, or from appearances, Commander Ikari's disposition."

Shinji winced and countered. "It was so long because I-"

"It really could have been shorter." Kaoru interrupted.

Shinji rounded on the three ancient loopers. "SHUT UP!"

The three locked up in surprise, before relaxing, albeit quietly. Shinji frowned and turned back to Gendo, who was looking at him with a slightly raised eyebrow. "Gendo, I showed us that to teach you

something. So I'm going to let you guess; what was the moral of that story?"

Gendo stared blankly at his son, before groaning. "That you mustn't run away from your problems?"

Shinji nodded. "You're half right. Throwing yourself into the bottle will only result in you losing all of your self-worth." A dark look over took Shinji. "The other half though..." Shinji looked at the other loopers.

It actually took a moment for the penny to drop for Asuka. "You can't be serious."

Shinji crossed his arms imposingly. "A person can only face up to life when life isn't *constantly stomping on his face* .

Kaoru rolled his eyes at Shinji's melodrama. "It's Gendo. Shinji, you of all people know our reasons. Do you know how many people he's hurt?"

"Yes. None." Shinji answered.

No one in the room spoke. Shinji sighed and elaborated. "Gendo has spent maybe a few dozen loops Awake, but everyone is treating him as if he's been awake for billions of years. He's only just woken up. We saw him try to be evil, try to be the villain, but he couldn't stomach it. Everyone hates him, but I'm half sure I'm the only person in the multiverse who's even half aware of the fact that this Gendo isn't the same. He's changed. And if you keep treating him like this..." Shinji's anger dwindled, a mix of regret and sorrow replacing it. "If we keep this up, we'll only drive him to the depths we fell to. And I won't let that happen, and neither should any of you."

Asuka got off her chair without a word

Shinji remained silent until Asuka reached the door. "Asuka, if you leave this room without trying to get over yourself, you really will be no different than Gendo."

Asuka froze, standing at the door with her hand on the knob. For a moment, the group wondered if she would throw it. Slowly, Asuka turned, her glare turning to Shinji. "You really are Gendo's son, aren't you Shinji?"

Shinji said nothing, and waited patiently.

Asuka gathered herself and gritted out her answer to Gendo. "You hurt Shinji... or anyone ever again; All. Bets. Are. Off." Asuka turned, opened the door, and left.

Kaoru coolly looked at Shinji, ignoring Gendo. "That's my opinion. If you want me to stop Shinji, I'll hold off from Gendo." Kaoru tapped his forehead with two fingers in a gesture of departure, and left.

Rei stood, bowed deeply, and followed Kaoru.

For a moment, Shinji and Gendo were almost alone. Penpen decided to make himself scarce, snagging a bottle of Gendo's whiskey and excusing himself. Gendo looked at his son. "Shinji-"

Shinji held up his hand to silence Gendo. "Look... I'll try and make things better. I'll keep you safe if anyone tries to get revenge for something you don't remember. But you need to remember something: you can't run away from the loops. So just try and live in the now."

Shinji turned and left the room, but came up short when Gendo said his name. "Yes?"

Gendo gulped and pointed in the direction that the other children had gone. "I got some... Uh... vibes, from those memories. Were you four romantically involved."

Shinji closed the door and Gendo was alone again.

The director of NERV collapsed onto his couch, emotionally exhausted, but to an extent, relieved. Mostly exhausted though.

Tracking down a bottle, Gendo poured himself a glass, and knocked it door, savoring the taste.

Water had never tasted so good.